How the FBI has shaped American religion

J. Edgar Hoover's influence was even farther reaching than we know.

by Jerome Copulsky in the September 26, 2018 issue

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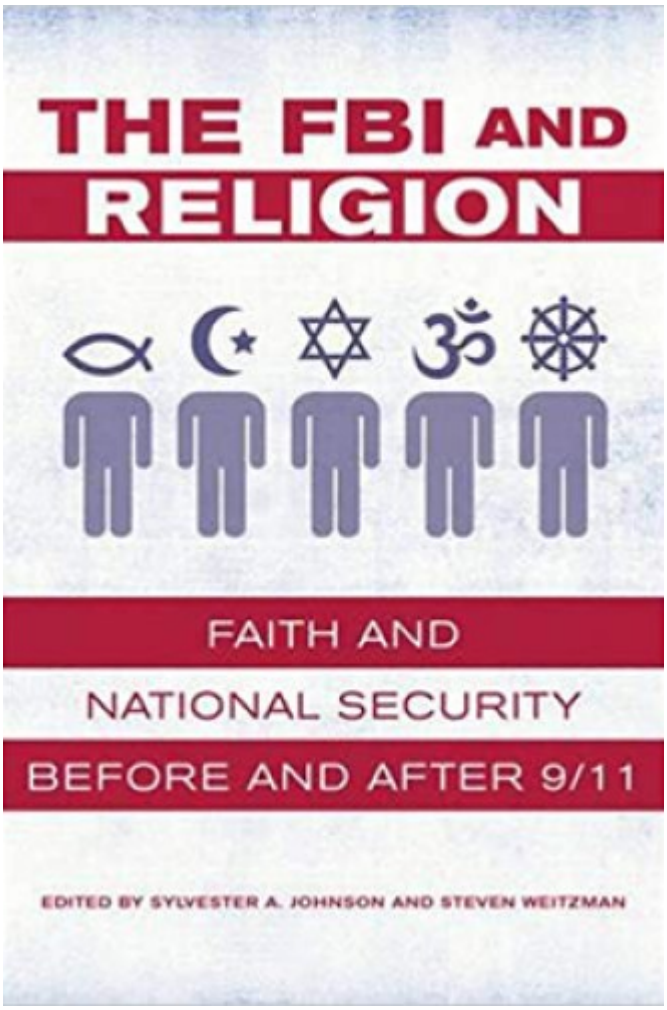

The FBI and Religion

Faith and National Security Before and After 9/11

Edited by Sylvester A. Johnson and Steven Weitzman
University of California Press

From its inception in 1908, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has kept a close eye on American religious institutions, communities, and religiously inspired political movements, regarding some as allies, others as threats to national security, and others as susceptible to malign foreign influence and infiltration.

Some of this story is already well known—especially the FBI's surveillance and harassment of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X, and, more recently, American Muslim communities after 9/11.

What makes this book especially valuable is its focus on the FBI as a key actor in the history of religion in America. It demonstrates just how deep and wide-ranging the FBI's interests in (and anxieties about) religious communities have been. Groups that advocated pacifism, asserted ethnic or racial pride, or were internationally oriented attracted the government's suspicious gaze. Even the so-called mainline Protestant churches did not escape the bureau's attentions.

Hovering throughout the story is the figure of J. Edgar Hoover, who led the FBI from 1924 until his death in 1972. Hoover, a former Sunday school teacher and relentless self-promoter, emerges from this volume as one of the most significant (if underacknowledged) actors in American religious history.

Regin Schmidt and Sarah Imhoff show how Hoover promulgated America's Cold War civil religion, and in particular its Protestant-Catholic-Jew constellation. Hoover regarded the Cold War as a religious conflict, an apocalyptic struggle undertaken by Christian civilization (led by the United States and rooted in belief in a Supreme Being). The enemy was the godless and evil communist empire, animated by the forces of secular materialism. Much of the FBI's activity during the Cold War years was dedicated to rooting out the communist menace. Hoover believed that communists sought to take advantage of Americans' fundamental goodness, and especially targeted religious institutions and sensibilities. He considered those who stressed the social values of what he called "Judaic-Christianity" as especially prone to enemy influence and infiltration.

The chapters by Dianne Kirby and Michael J. McVicar document how Hoover strove to be the arbiter of what was orthodox and heretical in the church. In particular,

Hoover had his eye on the liberal churches, whose involvement in the ecumenical, peace, and civil rights movements he regarded as subversive. In her essay, “J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI, and the Religious Cold War,” Kirby says that in the FBI, “Christian criticism of the status quo or dissent from the Cold War consensus was attributed to external communist influence, however tenuous the accusation and regardless of whatever concerns might have prompted the dissent.”

At the same time, Hoover actively encouraged conservative evangelicals—many of whom had withdrawn from the public sphere after the Scopes trial—to assert their political might. In this respect, he helped evangelicals to “develop a closer relational identity with the rest of the United States than had previously been the case, which helped them assimilate into mainstream culture and facilitated their participation in the political system.” Hoover’s suspicion of the liberal churches and his encouragement of evangelical patriotism, Kirby suggests, significantly influenced the decline of the former and the rise of the religious right as a political force in the 1970s and early 1980s.

After the Cold War and the vanquishing of communism as the United States’ chief ideological foe, the FBI’s interest in religion turned to the activities of what scholars call “new religious movements.” Catherine Wessinger’s contribution, “The FBI’s ‘Cult War’ against the Branch Davidians,” is a devastating indictment of the tactical errors, prejudices, and misunderstandings that led to the bureau’s ill-advised standoff with David Koresh and his followers at Mount Carmel Center ranch near Waco, Texas, and the assault that resulted in the deaths of 76 people.

The chapters on the surveillance of American Muslim communities after 9/11 by Michael Barkun and Junaid Rana inspire little confidence that the FBI has learned from its past failures, expended the time or resources to acquire a nuanced understanding of Islam, or become more sensitive to the concerns of practitioners of minority traditions.

The essays add up to a disturbing profile. All too often, in its quest for national security, the FBI has misunderstood and maligned American citizens whose beliefs and practices it regarded as alien or insufficiently patriotic. The resulting damage to religious communities and the lives and liberties of individuals cannot be understated. Steven Weitzman’s contribution, “Allies against Armageddon? The FBI and the Academic Study of Religion,” takes into account this fraught history. Although directed to the religious studies guild, his question—“Is there anything

practical that we can do . . . to help the FBI curtail the effect of bias on its interactions with certain religious groups?”—should also be posed to leaders of religious communities who may be asked to consult or cooperate with law enforcement authorities.

In light of the FBI’s historic connection with the politicization of evangelical Christianity—which led to Trump’s election—it’s ironic that the FBI has come to be regarded by many on the right as a shadowy force of the “deep state,” part of a conspiracy bent on destroying the Trump presidency.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “The feds and the faithful.”